



Jordanian women working at a factory in the al-Hasan Industrial Estate.

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Jordan's New "Political Development" Strategy

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"We have a problem here. There is no real [opposition] party except for the Muslim Brotherhood."¹ So an official of Jordan's new Ministry of Political Development and Parliamentary Affairs summed up the *raison d'être* of his place of employment.

The formal goals of the ministry created in December 2003 are to create strong parties that endorse King Abdallah II's vision of "Jordan First"; to increase the political participation of women and youth; to advance democratic dialogue and respect for the opinion of others, including judicial reform; and to promote a responsible press which serves the objectives of the Jordanian state and its people and represents the vision of change.² This is not some US-sponsored project, ministry

officials repeatedly assert, anticipating the criticisms of a suspicious population. They are right: the ministry in fact represents the Jordanian regime's attempt to build a base of long-term support while avoiding substantive political liberalization.

Remaking the Opposition

The very groups that helped the regime ward off dissent in the past—"ethnic Jordanians" from the East Bank versus Palestinians and Islamists versus the left—have suddenly become potential opponents. While some fault the new king, it was his father, King Hussein, who bred the current difficulties. Relying on East Bank tribal leaders and the Islamists, Hussein ignored rural economic development even as he signed an unpopular peace treaty with Israel in 1994. Islamists now preach against the regime's foreign policies, while the tribes have been steadily deprived of their

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sinecures in the public sector. The neo-liberal economic policies of King Abdallah have further eroded the state's ability to promise secure employment to Jordanians of East Bank origin.

The regime realizes that it needs an opposition. The Political Development Ministry continually declares it wants to hear all opinions, that political development means freedom of expression.³ Demands must be institutionally channeled, so the populace feels it has a voice. However, the regime rejects the current oppositional institutions in Jordan. Political parties, the ministry feels, should be non-religious and non-ideological. Professional associations, religious groups, women's and university groups, cultural and sports clubs should all be non-political and uninvolved in political platforms, erasing decades in which these organizations served as substitute forums for outlawed political parties. The minister of political development is making the rounds of all these groups, explaining the negative effects of politicization and interference of "external" forces.

Instead of what already exists, according to the head of the ministry, the king envisions three parties: right, left and center.⁴ To this end, the regime-supporting press devotes full-page articles to party members of old—leftist Baathists, Arab nationalists and even communists.⁵ Turning the previous policy on its head, and recalling maneuvers of Anwar al-Sadat during the 1970s, the left is now promoted to combat the right.

The previous privileged role of the right and religious groups is accordingly being reevaluated. Religious preachers, says the official Jordan First pamphlet, should concentrate on advising Jordanians on their daily lives and leave politics to those more qualified and specialized in the task. "Religion cannot take the role of the state, police, security.... They cannot say that normalization is forbidden—the state has already ruled on it. For decades now, religious sermons do not tell the truth. They preach fairy tales and unscientific theses."⁶ The army, however, is exempt from the educational visits of the Political Development Ministry, since it is believed to be non-political.

Youth, Education and Computers

A major focus of the ministry is on youth. "The older generation is already gone, but the ministry can educate the young to adhere to the rule of law in all circumstances. We will try to bring the tribes along, to educate them as we go," a ministry official explained. The ministry sets its goals in conjunction with the Ministry of Education in order to inculcate civility and create youth who respect the government's laws.

To this end, a combined USAID and Jordanian program seeks to revamp the educational system. The Education Reform for Knowledge Economy project is intended to make Jordan a model of education reform and a regional information technology hub, reminiscent of USAID's private sector remodeling project in the 1980s.⁷ At that time, Jordan was used as a laboratory or "test" for USAID's revised approach to private sector development, intended to strengthen business organizations and create a flourishing

private sector. That the previous effort met with little success has not deterred this new education reform program being one of the broadest in the Middle East and North Africa.

Education reform is designed to tackle the problem of rote memorization and lack of analytical thinking in the education system, as well as inadequate teacher training, schools and equipment. Computers will be integral to all phases of education in this project, and teachers will be trained in their use.⁸ E-learning will also be included. Key to the new curriculum will be incentives for girls' participation, and school-to-work programs. Several US companies have already been identified to rewrite the curriculum. The World Bank committed over \$100 million in loans to the effort, while the majority of USAID's contributions, almost \$400 million, are in grants. The reforms parallel King Abdallah's plans, announced soon after his ascension to the throne, to make Jordan an information technology (IT) center.

One major problem is making schooling relevant to the needs of the labor market. What the labor market needs, how-

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ever, is unknown, a fact USAID acknowledges. They suggest immediately contracting a study to determine the answer. What labor market is being discussed—domestic or regional—is another issue. While hopes for a flourishing Jordanian IT industry permeate the discussion, much of the higher education system has been geared toward regional labor markets, with expatriate workers in the Gulf countries sending their earnings back home. The domestic market is dominated by a weak service industry, retail businesses, public sector employment and, now, export processing zones. Early childhood education is another priority. This will focus exclusively on kindergarten, for ages four to six. Kindergarten is now dominated almost entirely by the private sector, mostly run by charitable or non-governmental village or family associations.

There is little public knowledge of what the reforms precisely entail. Indeed, the question of popular participation in the new curriculum has been sidestepped. While political debate rages in the United States over the issue of sex education in the classroom, Jordan's education reform can simply contract the development of "youth reproductive health messages" for the new curriculum.

The project's public reception has been mixed. The Westward-looking middle class believes it will bring computers into the schools and create a system akin to the US school system, which they observe closely for clues as to their children's brighter future. Others think the new curriculum is designed to "adjust" the

teaching of the religious schools, remove extremism and delete references to "the Zionist enemy." Islamist groups protest the changes, claiming they represent the creeping imposition of American values.⁹ This negative attitude toward the educational changes has gained increased currency in the climate of the Iraq war, as any initiative by the Jordanian government is suspected of being

Women enter the new vision of Jordan at the sewing machines of the export processing zones.

authored on American orders (*bi-amr Amrika*). "Tell America to let up on us on the schooling," said one professional woman who had been in favor of the changes when interviewed in 2004. "We need our education system to improve for the global world," she stated back then, fending off criticisms from others that the changes would decrease coverage of Islam. Now, she and many others have changed their assessment of US-associated changes.

Women and Rural Export Zones

Women are the ministry's other main focus. In February 2003, before the parliamentary elections of that year, the king decreed a new law establishing a quota of six women in parliament's lower house. While women are formally encouraged to be a regime-supporting pillar, their participation is "managed" by the regime, which creates quasi-official women's organizations, and controls or marginalizes existing ones.¹⁰ Further, to empower women as a bloc might require challenging the de facto base of the regime in conservative East Bank tribes and families. As the highly publicized women's campaign to end the honor crimes law demonstrates, the regime restricted the movement's activities,¹¹ and ultimately subordinated women's demands to its need to maintain tribal support. No monarchical decree amended the law, as occurred for other issues lacking public support.

The promotion of women might appeal to Westernized urban Jordanians, and certainly to the international community. Substantively, it is not seriously supported by the regime. However, the focus on women provides aid from international agencies that continue targeting women for funding and micro-financing. Once the money is allocated by these agencies, it is often used for different purposes.¹² Micro-loans are provided to women's organizations to establish themselves and purchase transportation, and to engage in embroidery, sewing and growing *za'tar* (thyme). But these activities remain disconnected from market demands, and thus selling the products is difficult.

In reality, women enter the new vision of Jordan at the sewing machines of the export processing zones. In a factory building of the Century group in northern Jordan's Qualifying Industrial Zone (al-Hasan Industrial Estate), around 100 veiled women, married and single, sew indigo blue Calvin Klein women's thongs and blue and purple Gap bras. Other sewing lines stitch for Hugo Boss, Nike, JC Penney, Old Navy, Tommy Hilfiger and Victoria's Secret.

Goods produced at the al-Hasan Industrial Estate are exclusively for export to the United States, as per a deal with Washington, and cannot be sold on the domestic market. The deal with Washington allows Jordan to export the products of the Qualifying Industrial Zones to the US duty- and quota-free, provided that the products have a pre-specified minimum percentage of value added from each of the participants in the deal—in Jordan's case, 12 percent from Jordan and 8 percent from Israel. This provision means that many of the labels on the bras and thongs sewn in northern Jordan say Made in Israel. Recently, Victoria's Secret began labeling their garments Made in Jordan.

The companies in Jordan's roughly 12 industrial zones are mostly East Asian, mainly Taiwanese and Chinese. Some are Israeli or Turkish; very few are Jordanian-owned. Managers of Israeli companies leave daily affairs to Jordanian or East Asian line supervisors, since incidents involving Israelis disciplining Jordanian women workers came to light. The political goal of creating good will between the two parties has not panned out. The Israelis fly in to check on their businesses and fly out the same day. Even government personnel obligated to attend functions with the Israelis prefer the Chinese, Pakistani or Indian managers and do not feel friendly toward the Israelis.

The zones are dominated by the textile industry, and staffed largely by women. The labor for some zones was initially brought in from China and Southeast Asia. In the highest-producing zone, 6,000 of 16,000 workers are Chinese, Filipina or Bangladeshi women. Despite the complaints of managers that Jordanian labor is inferior, Jordanian labor has now taken up half or more of the work in the zones.¹³ Most of the factories are closed to outsiders and inspection. The labor is low-paid, with no minimum wage enforcement or oversight for treatment (cases of severe abuse are reported periodically in papers). Even if the bras and thongs they sew could be sold in Jordan, the seamstresses could not afford them.

Many Jordanian women are bused in from the surrounding countryside, up to an hour away. To work in these zones, the women rely on inexpensive child care services. In the factory mentioned above, 25 women use the industrial zone's own nursery for their children, while many others put their children in nurseries in their home villages. Many of these nurseries, including that in this industrial zone, are unregistered and unregulated. Only now has the supervising ministry drawn up minimum safety and health guidelines for nurseries, which have yet to be implemented. The initial standards are basic, such as locating the nursery away from busy streets and intersections, and furniture,

kitchen and bathroom requirements. The best nurseries in the country, according to the supervising official, were only average.¹⁴ Nurseries are not included in the education reform initiative, since they serve children under four years old.

To draw labor into an industrial zone in Amman, a program was copied from East Asia, bringing women and girls from rural areas for stretches of two weeks at a time. A bus takes them home after that period for one day, and collects them again. While on the industrial estate, they stay in dormitories. Half the participants failed to return after the first period of work after the program was introduced.

At the macro level, the export zones create employment and generate export revenue, but their effects on the local economy are ambiguous. To the US embassy and Jordanian government, they create growth, provide an inflow of money and empower women. Visitors to the US embassy, including State Department official and vice presidential daughter Elizabeth Cheney, tour the zones. The premise that this employment will empower women relies on a simple equation of money with power, a formula not substantiated even in areas with long histories of formal female employment. Money does not by itself alter the underlying system of patriarchy. Such an assumption also ignores the potential backlash from unemployed male relatives.

Women may be employed, but the problem of male unemployment, particularly in the rural areas, remains. In the end, no matter how much the zones add to stability and growth, their success may well be temporary. Firms locate in Jordan for access to the US market, and that advantage will end with the termination of the Multi-Fiber Agreement in 2005.¹⁵

The Future of the Regime

More importantly, the dynamic of women working in these zones while the state detaches itself further from the provision of social services has left child care in the hands of the private sector. In rural areas, the private provision of child care is almost exclusively in the hands of non-governmental organizations organized along village or kinship lines. In line with increasing rural female employment, the demand for child care services has skyrocketed in those areas, a trend not observed in the urban areas. Nurseries and kindergartens have increased particularly near the export processing zones. These child care facilities are necessary for women to put their young children while they themselves work, officials at the zones stated. According to the head of the nurseries section of the Social Development Ministry, the extended family is in serious decline and not available as a resource for many rural working women.

Instead of extended families aiding in caring for children, broad kinship groups are now in charge of child care provision. Private associations providing child care are part of a large-scale societal trend of organizing along redefined village and kinship lines. Classified as voluntary civil society associations, they use kinship idioms, often altered from prior kin understandings. As the state withdraws from social welfare provision, these

associations redistribute welfare, jobs and social services such as child care within the circumscribed network. In only rare cases do associations aid non-kin or non-members.

State-level incentives encouraged organizing along tribal or village lines, indirectly incorporated into the state through municipal leaders. The state receives international aid to support the organizations. Subsidies are provided for the establishment of child care facilities by these organizations, which were given preferential treatment over women's or Islamist organizations. By default and through decentralizing administrative changes, the populace is encouraged to seek aid from local village or family groups. While the associations are society-based and not government creations, they lack the bargaining power vis-à-vis the state often attributed to grassroots or neighborhood associations. Recently announced local elections will further this policy of incorporating local Jordanian authorities, now in charge of municipal welfare services, while discarding the mass of the Jordanian population that previously formed the regime's base of support.

As part of Jordan's attempts to generate new and loyal constituencies in economic liberalization, the Political Development Ministry focuses on fostering youth who obey laws and advancing women as symbols of progress and modernity. But women are effectively a front for the real policy of retribalization. Regime actions demonstrate that its real pillars are local leaders and reorganized families, which it now provides with incentives via decentralization, along with a reinvigorated and heavily financed military. Subordinate and detached political parties are sought that present no threat to the regime's ongoing state of semi-authoritarianism. The retribalization of civil society will only further this trend. While at the grassroots level these kin and municipal associations may be democratic in practice (at least for males), their relation to the state precludes them from being an effective force for democratization. ■

Endnotes

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- 3 *Al-Dustur*, April 30, 2004.
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- 13 Interviews with owners, managers and officials in the Amman, Kerak and Irbid industrial zones, April–May 2004.
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- 15 Pete W. Moore, "The Newest Jordan: Free Trade, Peace and an Ace in the Hole," *Middle East Report Online*, June 26, 2003.